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ABSTRACT

As a technique of social control intimately associated with the display and control of power, humor reflects empowerment. Contemporary women have few traditions of using power, and a variety of covert factors have discouraged women's use of humor. The most significant of these is the way that the popular mind has defined humor as a male prerogative. Humor can only be achieved through use of symbolic and linguistic codes. Society has not fully recognized how jealously men guard the use of these codes. Because women's participation in humor has been alternately impeded and underestimated, it is important for social scientists and feminists to try to understand the factors responsible. This is not easy, partly because attitudes and beliefs are so deeply held that one may fail to see the very thing at which one is looking. An additional difficulty with humor is that its implicit symbolism enables meaning to coexist on multiple levels. Thus, it remains unclear to the critic whether a particular image or stereotype is being lampooned or upheld. And yet humor, perhaps more than other social measures, is a subtle indicator of the status of a subgroup. When the dominant group is ready to laugh at one's jokes, then one is a member of society. The document includes one table, one figure, and a 36-item bibliography. (JB)

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Continuity and Change
The Cultural Context of Women's Humor

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Abstract

The transformation of women's humor is examined over the past century in America. It is argued that women's humor is embedded in the cultural context, that rapid and dramatic change has taken place, but that differences continue to exist. A distinction between gender-inherent humor and gender-influenced humor is proposed.

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Introduction

Methodology

In surveying the course of women's humor over the past century and beyond, there is a need to distinguish humor by women as it existed, and humor as it was perceived and acknowledged by the culture. They are by no means synonymous, on account of a prejudice which has affected social science theory and research to the present day. Freud's (1960) willingness to dismiss joking from the female psyche is well known. Yet, as recently as 1984, a study based on large-scale, systematic cross-cultural research by psychologist Avner Ziv concluded:

> From my research, it appears that among amateurs there is a division between the sexes with respect to the two main dimensions of humor: Men create it more, and women enjoy it more (1984, p. 156).

In my own program of research I have found little use for comparing quantity of joking responses across genders. And let me hasten to add that I did apply such conventional approaches to humor 15 years ago (Groch, 1974a, 1974b). But even qualitative differences in humor styles or humor appreciation leave us with mounds of ambiguous data and a multitude of possible explanations. Is it nature or nurture? Early socialization or role models? Imitation or reinforcement? Gender role definition or culturally-sanctioned expressions?

Contextualized Humor

Like a number of feminist scholars today, I have increasingly turned toward an historical view of women's humor as providing the basic context of humor phenomena (Sheppard 1984, 1985). As a developmental psychologist I became convinced that the study of women's humor required an understanding of its origins and of the historical-cultural context in which such differences had been shaped. Literary critic Jane Marcus revealed a similar conviction after a period of intensive feminist reading. She wrote:

> This experience of reading theory has reinforced my commitment to the historical, for I believe that every new argument I have admired would have been strengthened by contextualization as well as by serious textual scholarship (1988, p. 288).

In order to explain contemporary gender differences in humor, we need to examine evidence for antecedents, taking note of the socio-historical context in which they appear. We may begin a study of women's humor by observing that (1) historically there is little record of it, (2) its characteristics tend to differ from men's, and (3) it has undergone distinctive historical transformation.

Cultural Embeddedness of Women's Humor

Historical Record

Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner (1988) recently published an impressive historical anthology of women's humor, providing evidence of a long-standing tradition of women's humor in America. As they stated in the introduction:

> Students of American literature and even those who study American humor have been largely unaware of the rich tradition of women's

> humor that has flourished ever since women began writing and publishing in the New World in the seventeenth century (1988, p. xv).

The anthology will introduce many of us to Judith Sargent Murray [1751-1820], who lampooned women's roles in her post-Revolutionary comedies or Frances Miriam Whitcher [1814-1852], who unwittingly jeopardized her minister-husband's job when parishioners found real-life parallels to literary caricatures. In a companion book, *A Very Serious Thing*, Walker suggested that women's humor remained a hidden tradition for two fundamental reasons: (1) its absence from major anthologies and critical studies and (2) widespread failure to perceive the "subtext of women's humor" (Walker, 1988, p. 120), to which we shall return later.

The women's tradition must be recovered and scrutinized if we are to test the validity of universal attributes in women's humor, as well as to document psychological shifts associated with social change. Women's history has been inadequately observed, because, as Jean Baker Miller expressed over a decade ago:

> Most records of these actions are not preserved by the dominant culture, making it difficult for the subordinate group to find a supporting tradition and history (1976, p. 11).

The dilemma is well-illustrated in the story of Kate Sanborn, an English professor, writer, and lecturer, who in 1885 wrote a book, *the Wit of Women* (Sanborn, 1885), to prove that women have a sense of humor. That she should have felt the need to write the book is, of course, ludicrous enough. But that the work, representing excerpts from over 100 women humorists, should be virtually

unknown to later generations of feminist scholars, reveals the difficulty we have in acquiring a sense of our tradition.

The exaggeration of male and female spheres in nineteenth century America (Bernard, 1981) gave rise to psychological and social differentiation including a women's humor tradition, which was lost from view. Of course, it was never really "in view" as it generally remained incomprehensible, obscure, and uninteresting for most male readers. Neither Rose O'Neill's (1874-1944) sentimental Kewpie characters nor Marietta Holley's (1836-1926) barbs about "wimmin's rites" and "foremothers" had much appeal for male sensibilities.

As a result, Marietta Holley, Kate Sanborn, and Rose O'Neill have never been given the status accorded Mark Twain, Will Rogers, or Charles Dana Gibson. Women's humor has never been judged on a par with men's and only now are we beginning to incorporate theoretical models suggesting that the dimension is not one of superiority/inferiority, but rather of conventions and styles embedded in cultural experience.

Historical Transformation

From a contextualist framework, the issue of historical change becomes closely associated with the study of cultural forms, including humor. Having briefly noted the paucity of historical women's humor which has been acknowledged, the investigation of changes in its functions or forms becomes an important source of evidence as to its social origins.

The acknowledged humor tradition is a male one. Not only is much humor slanted from the male perspective, but females tend to appear ludicrous as a condition of their gender (Curry, 1976). Jesse Bier (1960) pointed out that misogyny is a characteristic of much American humor, carried to an extreme in

the work of James Thurber. As Germaine Greer declared in *The Female Eunuch:* "The most telling playground for feelings of rejection about women is the joke department" (1971, p. 287).

For much of the nineteenth century, jokes abounded on the idea of women voting or women wearing pants, the so-called "Bloomer costume." In fact, nearly every effort by women to gain political rights and social equality elicited a snicker, comic drawings, or satirical verse. We clearly see how gender roles provide fodder for the joke mills. Visual, stage, and literary forms were predominantly created by men at the expense of women. Much humor was blatantly sexist (see Bergmann, 1986), and linguistic (Korsmeyer, 1977) and paralinguistic conventions (Marlowe, 1984-5) excluded women.

The recent women's movement has achieved changes in our awareness of gender role standards, which, in turn, alters what appears funny and by whom. The 1980s boasts the success of women stand-up comics, women cartoonists, and women humorists. In fact, anyone who follows media coverage knows that any number of women humorists have been interviewed by the press and featured on television spots. Has their numerical success, however, evoked parallel changes in the styles of humor used by women?

Types of Humor

Suzanne Bunkers, in an essay titled "Why are these Women Laughing? The Power and Politics of Women's Humor" (1985), posited one new direction as increased reliance on sarcastic humor, which she believed serves in "pointing out the ridiculous nature of female stereotypes in order to shatter these stereotypes and to move beyond them." Bunkers continued:

> When Lily Tomlin speaks as Ernestine or as Mrs. Judith Beasley, for instance, she is using these female caricatures to illustrate the danger in assuming that such stereotypes are reflections of all women (1985, p. 85).

Nancy Walker (1988) noted an increase in androgynous tone of literary humor in the 1980s, adding that "in contrast to earlier women's humor, these are not the perspectives of women as failures and victims . . .; rather, they are the confident voices of women who comment on contemporary American life" (p. 178).

Walker, among others, believes that women are finally able to promote a feminist sense of humor. It was defined in 1973 by Naomi Weisstein as follows: "a humor which recognizes common oppression, notices its source and the roles it requires, identifies the agents of that oppression" (Weisstein, 1973, p. 5). She contended that the women's movement was "reclaiming our autonomy and our history, our rights to self expression and collective enjoyment. In this process we are taking back our humor" (p. 10).

Gloria Kaufman (1980) in her co-edited humor anthology, *Pulling Our Own Strings*, characterized feminist humor as based on "visions of change."

> Feminist humor is based on the perception that societies have generally been organized as systems of oppression and exploitation, and that the largest (but not the only) oppressed group has been the female. (13)

Walker (1988) noted a further distinction in the forms of feminist humor, calling "subversive" those examples which operate within the cultural system

and "overt," that which "explores the fundamental absurdity of that system and calls for different ways of conceptualizing gender definition" (p. 147).

In most of these discussion of women's humor, the topic is focused on women's roles. In short, we may consider women's humor to be largely role-reactive, and historical changes in the forms of humor arise largely because those roles have changed. We begin to see that perhaps the question is not so much whether any differences remain between men's and women's humor, but how twentieth century women's humor has been transformed from dimorphism associated with separate spheres to the point where Cathy Guisewite, Nicole Hollander, and Erma Bombeck can gain national syndication.

Characteristics of Women's Humor

Across various forms of humor, the proportion of works by women tend to be low. Women often selected different themes from men, or would approach the form in a contrasting manner. Most theories suggest that males and females enjoy contrasting types of humor and that gender, patterns of socialization, or sex-role conceptualization may account for what differences exist. Gender bias in humor itself or failure to consider psychological aspects of gender identity color interpretations of findings and perpetuate stereotypes.

Women's humor has long been placed in a separate category from men's, as evidenced social beliefs, professional opportunity, and social science research. We need only compare the cartoons of *Playboy* with those of the *Ladies' Home Journal* to verify these differences, or count the number of women cartoonists on the comics page--or, better still, the editorial page. Linda Morris summarized what has been apparent for the last 150 years:

> Thus, for both sexes, the final and decisive factor that distinguishes their humor from each other's is their preoccupation with the affairs, activities, and concerns of their own sex. (1978, p. 275).

Because women have been successful as humorists, the obstacles against them range from invisible to incomprehensible. Social scientists who promote notions of humor as non-feminine, not only fall into circularity, but strengthen the status quo. Roles affect not only behavioral codes, but systems of meanings and perceptions underlying social experience (Berger and Luckmann 1967, Douglas, 1968; Zijderveld, 1968). That gender roles are so pervasive in coloring this experience (Bem, 1985; Kohlberg, 1966) bears implications for all forms of humor. Humor is grounded in social experience, and the social experience of each gender (and subculture) is unique. From men's' and women's experiences in society come meanings, emotional reactions, and social reference groups.

Although society has become more egalitarian in use of humor, this does not eliminate all differences in response to style, thematic material, or in the underlying psychological structures. For example, women may relate to fantasy material in a manner different from men (Douvan, 1970). An enhanced ease of entry into fantasy realms, moreover, would heighten appreciation of so-called nonsense humor (Groch, 1974a), which is symbolic, rather than realistic. When the present writer asked a group of subjects to rate cartoons along several dimensions and found that women assigned higher ratings as "corresponds to reality." Research studies have rather consistently reported a female preference for humor designated as absurd (Groch, 1974a; Malpass & Fitzpatrick, 1959; O'Connell, 1960). What men dismiss as unreal and detached from themselves, women can perceive as vivid, emotion-laden, and as integrally related to the

psyche. David Gutmann proposed that these differences reflect patterns of socialization differentiated by gender (Gutmann, 1970).

Traits. Another difference stems from the fact that few psychological traits can be assessed independent of gender. For traits underlying comedy, prominent ones included aggression, dominance, competence, assertion, rebellion, and self-disparagement. Aggression and assertion may be posited as differing in degree; assertiveness requires some of the same underlying motivation as aggression. Similarly, competence is a weaker form sharing some qualities with dominance.

Insert Figure 1 about here

To form two independent dimensions, aggression/dominance are viewed as one continuum, assertion/competence the other. Traits of aggression/dominance are those most strongly associated with male-initiated humor, especially in the most gender-specific forms. Assertion/competence are personality traits implicit in the comic forms, and as weaker than the former, may be associated with female styles. Even if a female comic selects a self-disparaging theme, the audience must yield, if only briefly, to the performer's control in order to be entertained. The stand-up comic enters this realm, both in behavior and image projected. To do comedy is to be strong and in control. These traits represent qualities traditionally viewed as "masculine," although they characterized the early-century "new woman," as well as the goals of the "liberated" woman.

Gender and Humor

Gender-Inherent Humor. One type of hierarchy in humor moves from informal social settings towards higher levels of abstraction. At the same time, the immediacy of the performer/artist is removed from the audience/reader-viewer. Beginning with social humor through stand-up comedy, the two forms are gender-inherent. The initiator/performer speaks in a male or female voice and typically wears clothing reinforcing gender designation. All mannerisms, gestures, and style are gender-related, and, when inappropriate, typically serve to make a point of the fact. As shown in Table 1, the goals and technique of each form provide different emphases.

Insert Table 1 about here

Gender-Influenced Humor. Cartoons and literary works, in contrast, are anonymous to a degree that occasionally one is amazed to learn the artists' gender. Rea Irwin, one-time art editor of the *New Yorker* would be surprised to see himself on a recent list of women's art slides. And collectors of early-century magazine cartoons are often surprised that Lou Rogers and Barksdale Rogers are women. Under the pseudonym "George" Madden Martin, the literary humorist published articles on her experience as a woman in politics (Cook, 1980). Even when a name or style does not reveal the originator and his or her gender, our social expectation may attribute gender authorship. Abstract creations of literary or artistic form are thus "Gender-influenced." In fact, with over 90% of cartoonists being male, we would be fairly correct in assuming male authorship, as with much historic literary humor.

Conclusions

As a technique of social control and one intimately associated with the display and control of power, humor reflects empowerment. Contemporary women have few traditions of using power, and likewise there are a variety of covert factors which have discouraged women's use of humor. The most significant of these is the way that the popular mind, reinforced by social scientists, has defined humor as a male prerogative. The comic page, the comedy club, and the great humor novel are all assumed the province of men. And yet these are the channels by which humor as a corrective serves to challenge politics, policies, and underlying social realities.

Humor can only be achieved through use of symbolic and linguistic codes. Society has not fully recognized how jealously men guard the use of these codes. And comedians know how easy it is to achieve control through the simple phrase, "That's not funny" (Fury 1980, p. 165). Comedy writer Ann Beatts attributes much of the difficulty in the field to men's responses.

> It's true, our being funny often seems to scare them. I don't know what they're worried about. Maybe, knowing that humor is the best of weapons, they're reluctant to put it into our hands. (1975, p. 186).

As women's participation in humor has been alternately impeded and underestimated, it is important for social scientists and feminists to try to understand the factors responsible. This is not easy, partly because attitudes and beliefs are so deeply held that we may fail to see the very thing we are looking at. There is an additional difficulty with humor, in that its implicit symbolism enables meaning to coexist on multiple levels (Douglas, 1968; Freud, 1960; Fry, 1963; Richman, 1977). Walker alluded to this in her discussion of the

feminist subtext in historic humor (1988, p. 120). Thus, it remains unclear to the critic whether a particular image or stereotype is being lampooned or upheld. There will never be consensus as to the meaning if jokes or as to whether a particular representation is predominantly positive or negative, in promoting a particular image.

And yet humor, perhaps more than other social measures, is a subtle indicator of the status of a subgroup. When the dominant group is ready to laugh at one's jokes, then one is a member of society.

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Table 1

Goals and Techniques of Humor Forms[a]

	Goals	Techniques
Gender-Inherent Humor		
Social Humor	dominate	joking
Stand-up Comedy	provoke	story re-enact
Gender-Influenced Humor		
Cartoonists	unmask	caricature
Humorists	satirize	irony, parody

[a] Entertainment functions excluded

Figure 1

Relations Among Traits Used in Humor